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## TRANSFORMING CLAY: GAMO CASTE, GENDER, AND POTTERY OF SOUTHWESTERN ETHIOPIA

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**ABSTRACT** Among the Gamo of southwestern Ethiopia, a select group of women continue to make pottery offering an opportunity to study how potters learn and practice their craft within a caste structure. Gamo potters are predominately women, husbands and other male family members occasionally may help with certain aspects of pottery production and distribution. The potter's social standing in Gamo society determines that they have limited farmland, which forces potters to work as full-time craft specialists. Since Gamo society is virilocal, women potters will typically learn their craft in their natal community but then will have to relearn the complex production and distribution sequences once they move to their husband's community. A potter will also encounter a new set of economic conditions at her husband's house that may influence the degree to which family members are dependent upon her skill. A potter's skill can be tested if resources are not available, such as proper clays, room to store and dry her pots, and finding materials for firing. Thus, she has to use her skill to transform the clays into pots that will be economically viable for her family. Furthermore, she will need to forge new relationships with non-potter community members in order for her to trade her pots for money or food. This larger interplay between gender and caste is countered by the individual potter's skill and how potters manage their limited resources as Gamo artisans.

**Key Words:** Caste; Gender; Gamo; Pottery; Ethnoarchaeology.

### INTRODUCTION

Globalization has dramatically affected potter's lives around the world with a steady stream of metal and plastic containers replacing low-fired pottery for household use (David & Hennig, 1972; Woods, 1984; Sargent & Friedel, 1986; Skibo, 1994). The impact of industrial wares on potter's lives and how they have adapted varies, as some potters have begun producing pots to sell to tourist (Arnold, 2008) and others have stopped their craft. Some potters have difficulty competing with industrial goods, as metal containers may be more expensive but last longer (Birmingham, 1975: 385; Arnold, 1985: 142–143; Skibo, 1994; Deal, 1998: 90), they may be more effective in heating food (Skibo, 1994; Deal, 1998: 90) and industrial wares often become desirable as symbols of wealth and status (Sargent & Friedel, 1986; Skibo, 1994; Trostel, 1994). In most of the world, women are the potters and this global change from low-fired pottery to metals and plastics is having a dramatic economic and social impact on women's lives.

However, in southern Ethiopia, potters continue to make pottery on a daily basis to sell to their neighbors or at weekly markets. Since I began studying pottery in southwestern Ethiopia in 1996, there has been a steady increase of industrial goods

being imported into southern Ethiopia and incorporated into the rural household assemblages but household pottery continues to be ubiquitous within households. There are three factors influencing why pottery continues to be a critical material among southern Ethiopian households: (1) the price of pottery continues to be lower than industrial goods; (2) people prefer to cook with pottery because their meals taste better; and (3) there is long-standing relationship between potters and non-potters economically and socially through the patron-client system. With the world changing rapidly, potters face daily decisions concerning how to produce and distribute their wares to compete against the influx of industrial goods.

Although the world is rapidly changing from traditional pottery to industrial goods, archaeologists still rely on pottery as the essential material to address cultural change and issues of social, economic, and political identity (Bowser, 2000). However, in archaeology, pottery studies tend to focus on issues of community identity rather than on individual potters, who are usually women in most societies (Skibo & Schiffer, 1995). Thus, the bulk of archaeological analysis relies on issues of pottery, but unknowingly or dismiss the fact that pottery is a part of women's culture (Sassaman, 1998: 98). Agency theory is continuing to move archaeologists away from the separation between the material and the individual actor and their actions (Hodder, 1986; 2000; Barfield, 1997: 4; Dornan, 2002). One useful method to bridge agency between an individual's actions and mate-

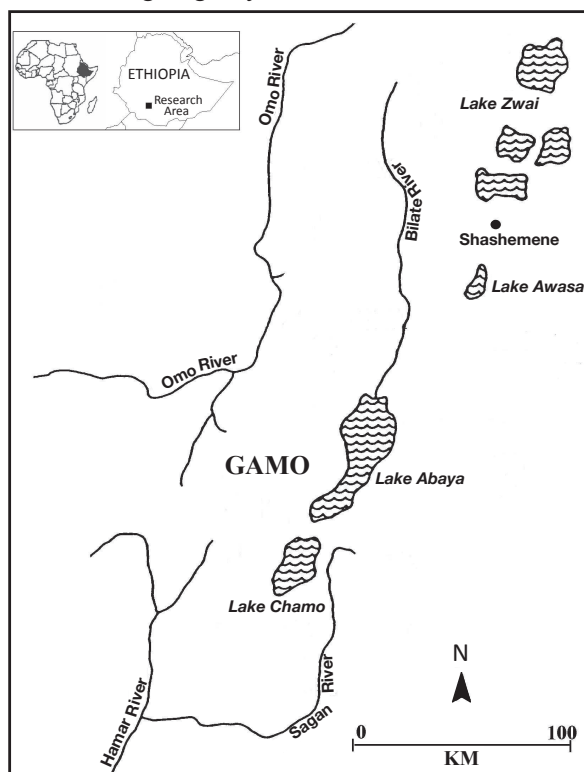


Fig. 1. Map of the Gamo region within Ethiopia and Africa.

rial culture is ethnoarchaeology, especially using the life cycle and the chaîne opératoire approaches (Dobres & Robb, 2000). Furthermore, ethnoarchaeology is a critical methodological tool that aids archaeologists in interpreting gender in the archaeological record. Using ethnoarchaeology can address the complexities of gender as described by Gero (2001: 16), "Gender is constantly negotiated and reconstituted, seizing on tradition, surprising in new assertions, sometimes exaggerated and sometimes played down; it is performed routinely or strategically." A Gamo potter brings her personal expression to bear when bringing life to the clay, but the dynamic interchange she has with her family, community, and patrons also has a profound influence on her.

This paper draws on my ethnoarchaeological research among with Gamo potters, who live in southwestern Ethiopia just west of the Rift Valley lakes of Abaya and Chamo (Fig. 1). The focus of this paper is to present how the caste system among the Gamo peoples impacts potter families and specifically potter women, with regard to how individuals must work within the social parameters in producing and distributing pots and how they manage their resources to fulfill their needs. I use a combination of the lifecycle and chaîne opératoire approaches to explore the intricacies of pottery production and distribution through the actions of Gamo women artisans. It is my hope that by illuminating how Gamo potters produce and distribute their pottery I reveal that potters make a complex array of decisions and social actions to create a living vessel.

## THE GAMO

The Gamo people are an Omotic speaking society encompassing 1,000,000 individuals living in southwestern Ethiopia. They are patrilineal and have a virilocal post-marital residence pattern. Furthermore, they have a strict caste system. These three cultural characteristics have a major influence on gender roles within Gamo society, which I will elaborate on throughout the paper. They live directly west of Lakes Abaya and Chamo, which encompasses both lowland and highland environments along the Rift Valley escarpment (ranging from 1,600 to over 3,000 m). The majority of people engage in subsistence farming of maize, sorghum, tef, cotton, and bananas in the lowlands and wheat, barley, potatoes, ensete, beans, and peas in the highlands. If not engaged in subsistence farming or as a merchant in one of the local towns, then most likely the individual is an artisan, working as a potter, hideworker, groundstone maker, or ironworker.

The majority of the research described in this paper was conducted between September 1996 to April 1998 in the Gamo districts of Ochollo, Doko, and Zada (J.W. Arthur, 2002; 2003; 2006; 2009; K.W.Arthur et al., 2009; 2010). This paper draws on my time talking with potters about their social and technical issues related to ceramic procurement, production, and distribution. I documented each sequence of the potter's production process to address issues of regional variation, individual innovation, and cultural tradition. In addition, I analyzed 1,058 vessels from 60 households in three communities representing individuals and families of all the caste and socioeconomic groups in Gamo society, which gave

me insight into the consumer's perspective.

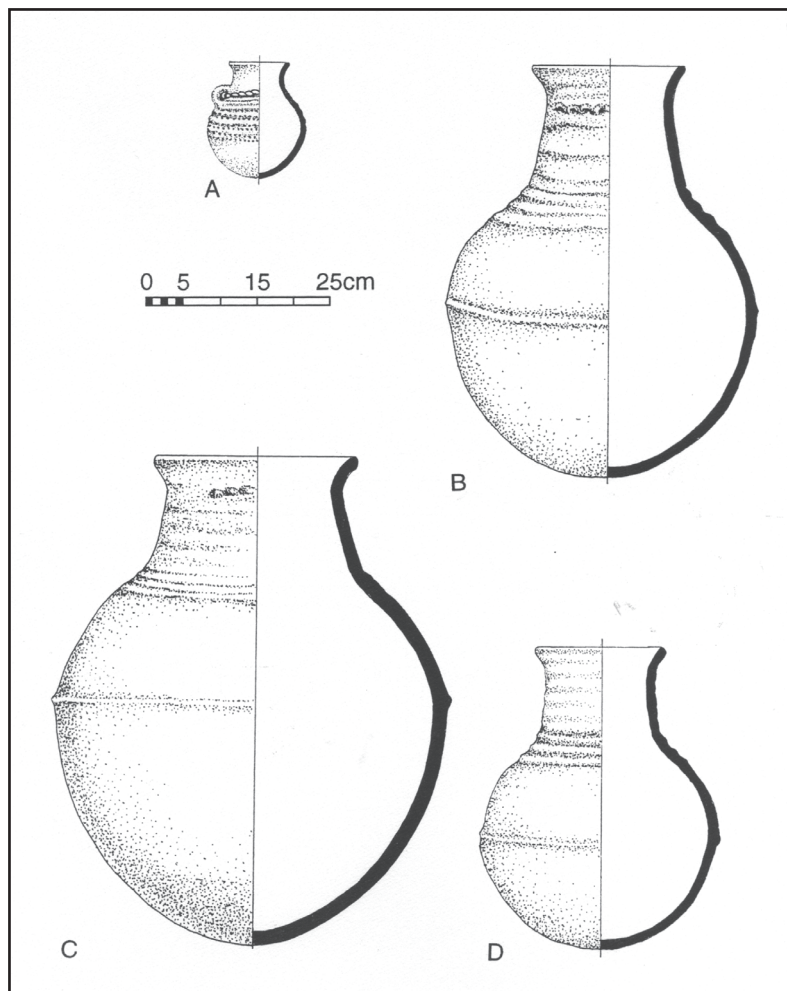
There are two communities, Zuza Ochollo and Guyla Zada, which are pottery-producing communities and one non-pottery-producing community, Etello Doko. In the first stage of my research, I conducted a census in each of the three Gamo communities. The census was undertaken to understand the demographic, status, and wealth differences among households in each of the three communities and to build a rapport with each community member. After the census was completed, I chose 20 household compounds from each community. In each village, I stratified the sample to include the different socioeconomic groups (i.e., elder, farmer, potter, hideworker, etc.). At each of the 60 household compounds, I recorded the complete life cycle for each ceramic vessel (where purchased, cost, age, use, stored, etc.).

## CASTE

The Gamo of Ochollo, Doko, and Zada hierarchically divide themselves into three caste strata: *mala* [highest prestige and farmers and weavers]; *mana* [potters]; and *degala* [lowest prestige and ironsmiths and hideworkers]. The Gamo caste system exhibits characteristics associated with caste systems described in South Asia and other parts of Africa. They organize themselves into endogamous caste strata according to occupation and patrilineal descent. Each caste group is associated with different levels of prestige, purity/pollution, and power that restrict social interactions (eating, household space, sexual activity, burials, etc.) and access to leadership positions between caste groups. Many people consider the artisans as ritually impure and therefore any contact between the *mala* (ritually pure) and the artisans that is not culturally sanctioned will result in the disturbance of the ancestors, which could result in the infertility of the people, land, and nature (K.W. Arthur, 2013 paper in this volume). Because many *mala* believe the artisans are impure, they are allowed to perform impure duties such as healing and circumcision. Furthermore, although artisans identify themselves ethnically as Gamo and speak the same language and dialects as others in their community, they also speak an argot or ritual language to protect craft knowledge.

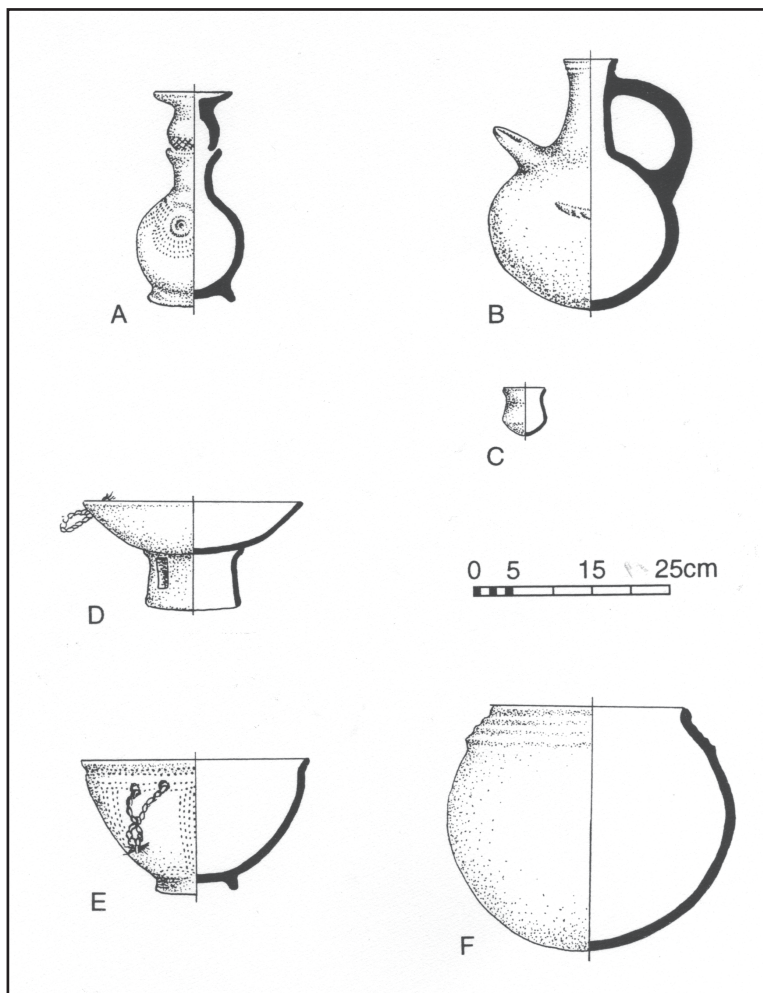
## GAMO POTTERS AND THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Making pottery is extremely difficult work, compared to any Western sense of work, especially when one considers there is little compensation for the amount of work it entails to produce a viable pot. Women are the potters in Gamo society, working and making decisions concerning all aspects of the production and marketing of their wares including: digging the clay; carrying the clay and wood; forming and firing the vessels; and carrying the pots to the market. There is variation within each household as to how much a husband will help with some of the production tasks such as digging and cleaning the clay, collecting the wood, firing the pots, and carrying the vessels to the market. Since Gamo potters do not usually own land or if they do, own a small plot given to them by a *mala*



**Fig. 2.** Profile drawings of (A) Narrow-Mouth Small Jar, (B) Large Jar, (C) Beer Jar, and (D) Narrow-Mouth Medium Jar, which the Gamo potters produce.

elder, they are forced to be full-time specialists and rely on their pottery production as their primary means of household income. Their production routine is only slowed during the second rainy season, as it is often difficult to obtain the clays due to flooding and the unfired vessels dry too slowly. Gamo potters produce 14 different vessel forms and the number of pots varies with each potter, ranging from 5 to 70 vessels per week (Fig. 2, 3, 4). This large range is due to a number of factors such as whether the potter has a family support group. Some women potters have small children and their husbands have gone to Addis Ababa to try to make more money and this may hamper the number of pots a woman can produce since she has to engage in all aspects of the manufacturing process alone. Other women have large support networks such as co-wives, mother-in-law, sons, and

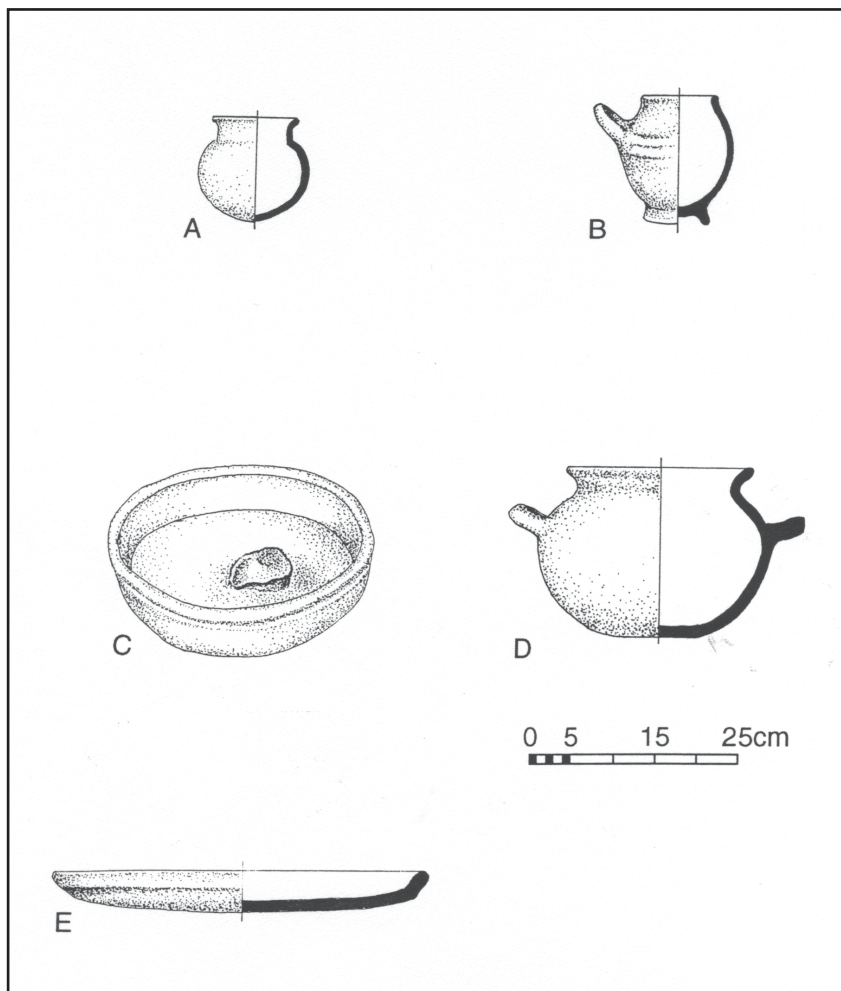


**Fig. 3.** Profile drawings of (A) Water Pipe, (B) Coffee Pitcher, (C) Coffee Cup, (D) Dish, (E, F) Bowl, which the Gamo potters produce.

daughters that can help in most aspects of producing pots. Some potters who are friends will travel to the clay sources together to procure the clays. In addition, sometimes a mother or daughter will travel to each other's community and stay for a week or so and help the host potter manufacture pots. There are competitive feelings between different potter families, even if they are friends, and so the majority of potters work alone or with their own family members.

Postmarital residence in Gamo society is virilocal, thus potter women move to their husband's household, where they may encounter a range of economic conditions differing from their natal household. Potters store their materials, produce vessels, dry, prefire, and fire their vessels within their family compound. Some potters have the economic means to have small workshops adjacent to





**Fig. 4.** Profile drawings of (A) Wide-Mouth Small Jar, (B) Single-Handle Jar, (C) Foot Washing Bowl (D) Wide-Mouth Medium Jar, and (E) Baking Plate, which the Gamo potters produce.

their house, where they conduct their work. The poorest potters will work either in their compound or in the house vestibule. The majority of potters live in clusters of potter households that are segregated away from the higher farmer castes, usually on land that is not suitable for farming such as located on a steep slope. As mentioned above, they are dependent upon their craft to make a living since potters rarely have more than their household garden to produce food. Although some potters can afford to build a small structure to use as a workshop this does not suggest that their level of production is significantly higher than potters that do not have a workshop. Some potters have been fortunate to receive farmland from the *mala* caste members and therefore can supplement their income to be able to afford building a small structure.



## LEARNING AND POTTING SKILLS

Pottery production is a learned skill transmitted to a select group of Gamo girls and women in the *mana/chinasha* caste group. Girls raised within a potter household begin to learn how to produce pottery when they are 6–13 years old. The learning process starts with informal instruction, which usually last for three years or until the daughter is married. Girls begin with simple but critical tasks such as helping their mothers mine and carry the clay from the clay sources to the potter's household. Girls also help with cleaning the clay of large stones, grinding the clay on a groundstone, selecting grog temper from broken pots that cracked during the drying or firing process, and transporting water from the well or stream using a large jar to mix the clays. After they become more experienced with all of the production activities, they will begin practicing with the more difficult task of forming small vessels.

Potters have to be adaptive because they learn how to produce pots in their natal household, but once they marry they are forced out of this nurturing setting to live with her husband's family (see this volume, Kaneko, 2013). Although potters state that they make pottery similar to the person who taught them, usually their mother, their husband's community of relatives and new friends will shape how they produce and distribute their wares. Thus, many of the complex steps that she learned as a child, she will have to relearn in her husband's community, such as where the clay and temper sources are located and if the drying process is the same as in her childhood region, and the temperature and precipitation patterns may be different in her new community affecting drying and firing. In addition, she has to learn what types of fuelwood are accessible and how her new village potters prefire their vessels. The learning process not only influences the potter's production methods but also has direct implications towards how the potter forms and decorates the vessel, since this is dictated by consumer demands. The distribution of her pots will change as she also needs to learn which weekly markets to go to, where she can best sell her wares and if the prices for different forms are different from where she grew up.

## PROCURING CLAY: SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL DECISIONS

Gamo potters have three main considerations when trying to figure out where to mine their clays: (1) relationships with landowners; (2) geological constraints, and (3) proximity. Each village has its own set of clay sources, which are either mined by individuals or with other potters in the village. Women and men engage in digging and collecting the clay, but it is only the women who will transport the clay back to the household. Potters need to find a landowner willing to allow them to mine on their land, but this is becoming more difficult as landowners feel that clay mining destroys their valuable farmland. Living within a caste society results in potters not being treated well by some *mala* members and has resulted in losing their right to mine for clay, such as in the community of Ezo Shasha. The Ezo Shasha potters have no farmland and would mine on a farmers

land for four different clays, which they used in all of their different vessel forms. However in 1991, the *mala* stopped giving permission to the potters to mine their clay and they had to switch from four clays to only one clay that they had never used before. The Ezo Shasha potters complain that since they have started using the new clay, the pots break more easily than when they used the four clays prior to 1991. The Ezo Shasha example is becoming more of an issue as the Gamo population is steadily rising and more families need land to farm. This also has instilled competition between potter families living in Guyla as potter families do not share their clay sources with each other to protect their clay source(s) from becoming depleted.

Geological factors can hamper mining as one Guyla family that uses a clay source named *pullticalo* (after the landowner's name) has problems with the water table flooding the hole. This is especially a problem during the rainy seasons, which limit the frequency of production among this family of Guyla potters. The *pullticalo* clay is extracted approximately 4–5 m from the surface with the majority of the clay lying just above and below the water table (Fig. 5). An adjacent source was abandoned after a potter was killed in 1996, when the wall of the clay pit collapsed. This potter family is uncertain about their future because the *pullticalo* clay source is becoming too dangerous and it is difficult to find a landowner within the proximity of Guyla willing to let the potters mine clay.

Proximity to the clay source is an important factor for Gamo potters, since potters carry the clay in baskets (*tise*) on their backs. Guyla potters mine their clay from sources that are less than 6 km from their village. This agrees with Arnold's (1985: 39–52) worldwide sample of potters that indicates a majority of potters collect their clay within 7 km of their village and 33% of the world's



**Fig. 5.** A potter digs from the *pullticalo* clay source in Guyla to find the suitable clay for producing pottery.

pottery collectors collect within 1 km of their production site. This is not surprising given the amount of labor involved in transporting clay from the sources. In the Ochollo district, potters living in different communities within Ochollo are assigned by the district leaders where to mine their clays. Thus, Zuza potters do not have a problem with landowners in procuring the three clays that they use. All three clays used by the Zuza potters are in close proximity between 1 and 6 km of their communities. However, this is still an arduous and time consuming process since it requires Zuza potters to walk five hours (round trip) to transport two types of clays. And three hours (round trip) to carry the third clay type.

Gamo potters are not immune to the larger political changes that have occurred in Addis Ababa. Beginning in 1974 until 1991, the socialist government of the Derg had a policy of moving families from the highlands to the lowlands adjacent to Lake Abaya in order to give each family farmland, including potters. However, there are no suitable clay mining areas in the lowlands. For example, I witnessed that in the community of Fura Mandita potters had to walk six hours round trip (approximately 14 km round trip) up to the highland Donay region to obtain their clays.

Once the clays have been brought to the household, there is a detailed set of techniques used to prepare the clay before the potter can begin forming the clay. It begins with the entire family usually working together to clean the clays of unwanted large temper, which could cause problems by ripping the clay wall when the potter is forming the vessel. Most Gamo potters mix three to four types of clay together to produce all of the vessel forms. Naturally mined temper (non-plastic inclusions) and/or grog (small pieces of broken pottery) also are added to the clays. Some Gamo consumers will sell or trade their broken pots back to a potter so that the grog can be used as temper. Except for the grog, Zuza potters do not use additional temper because enough temper occurs naturally in the Zuza clays. After the clays are cleaned, clays are pounded by women potters with a large stick (*bookadoka*) and sifted through a woven basket (*zizarey*). The *zizarey* or woven basket also serves to aid in measuring the clay proportions in the final clay mixture. The potters mix the clays by stomping on the clay with one foot. Once the clays, tempers, and water have been mixed together, in their proper proportions, the potters can begin to form the vessels.

## WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN VESSEL PRODUCTION

The variation evident in the production of different Gamo vessel forms highlights the complex and intricate knowledge and skills that are essential to women potters. Using the *chaîne opératoire* approach, the detailed decision making of Gamo potters can be documented for each vessel type. The *chaîne opératoire* approach working in tandem with the social and historical context of a society can address issues of social boundaries through patterns of pottery production (e.g., Graves, 1994; Hosler, 1996; Dietler & Herbich, 1998; Gosselain, 1998; Hegmon, 1998; Stark, 1998; 1999; Stark et al., 2000). Vessels are formed using a combination of hand building, coil-and-scrape, and paddle-and-anvil techniques.

Decisions related to drying times are also important and relate to seasonality, clay types, and vessel size and type. The type of vessel construction is dependent upon the vessel form. While the vessels are still wet, a piece of leather (*gelba*) or cloth is used to help form the rim and neck. The exterior of the vessel is thinned using a bamboo stick (*mylee*). The interior of the vessel is thinned and smoothed with the outer covering of half a seedpod (*kayshe* tree, *Jacaranda mimosifolia*) that is obtained from the lowland area adjacent to Lake Abaya.

The jars (e.g., narrow-mouth small jar, narrow-mouth medium jar, large jar, and beer jar) are formed by drawing the clay up to produce the upper part of the body and then the neck and rim are formed using the coil-and-scrape method (J.W. Arthur, 2006: 37–40). Once the top half of the vessel is formed and dried sufficiently, it is turned upside down on its rim and placed on a piece of ensete leaf to keep the vessel from touching the ground. Then the rounded base is formed using the coil-and-scrape method until the base is eventually closed (Fig. 6). The wide-mouth medium jars are formed as the other jars are, except that the base of the wide-mouth medium jar is flat instead of round. The production process is more elaborate for beer jars. After the upper half is formed, the vessel's exterior is scraped to thin the walls. Then the potter uses two hand stones, one in the interior and one on the exterior, to pound and compact the walls of the beer jar.

Small-to medium-sized bowls and serving dishes are formed by pounding a fist into a lump of clay (J.W. Arthur, 2006: 40). Then the potter moves around the bowl and dish shaping it until it is formed into a bowl or dish. Although large bowls are produced similar to the jars by forming the upper half first and then the base, some bowls and dishes have base stands attached to the body, which are formed after the body is shaped into its final form.



**Fig. 6.** A Guyla potter forming the base of a jar by using the coil and scrape method.





**Fig. 7.** A Zusa potter forming a baking plate.

The baking plate is formed from a lump of clay that is pounded with the fist until it begins to take the shape of a baking plate (J.W. Arthur, 2006: 40–42) (Fig. 7). Then the potter moves around the vessel slowly working on the shape of the rim with a wet piece of leather or cloth. After the baking plate dries in its first stage (i.e., 15 days), the exterior of the baking plate is scraped with a bamboo stick and then laid upon a grinding stone and pounded with a hand stone to compact the vessel wall. The interior of the baking plate is burnished whereas the exterior is left rough and plain in appearance.

The coffee pitcher is produced by forming the base and body similar to the small-to medium-sized bowls. Then the neck is produced using the coil-and-scrape method. The spout is formed by attaching a small coil on the upper part of the body. A small stick is used to hollow out the spout, which is then shaped into its final form.

The Gamo potters are consistent in how they make each vessel type but there is an individual choice that determines the types of vessels a potter produces such as learning history of each potter, suitable clays, and consumer demands. Gamo potters will usually specialize in the production of one or two vessel types even if they are able to produce all 14 types. This results in specific communities known for producing better types than other communities. For example, Guyla potters state they do not usually produce baking plates because their clay is not adequate for this type of production but they specialize in the production of beer jars.

Gamo potters bring their clay to life when they begin to form their vessels as some Gamo believe that pots and other materials go through a symbolic lifecycle that parallels human rites of passage the same lifecycle changes as humans (K.W. Arthur, this volume concerning the Borada-Gamo). Gamo potters name pots with human anatomical features (J.W. Arthur, 2006: 46). Potters name the top of the

rim the mouth (*dona*), the neck is also called the neck (*core*), the body is called the stomach (*oolo*), and the base is called the anus (*tache* in Zuza or *meskatay* in Guyla). Specific types of decoration correspond to particular anatomical features, such as *dansa*, which translates as breast. This rare type of appliqué is a large oval, which points upward and is placed on the upper body of cooking jars. Water pipes (*guyas*) usually have a specific decoration that is only placed on this vessel form that is called *pigay*. *Pigay* translates as a scar and is associated with scars created by burning the skin believed to heal wounds and pains. In addition, the hole, where the hollow bamboo stem (*pikay*) is used to suck the smoke from the water pipe, is called the drinking place (*owezaso*). Besides giving potters a classification for specific parts of a pot, the naming of anatomical features by Gamo potters suggests a symbolic importance to potters. Since the majority of potter families rely on the manufacturing of pottery vessels for their sole livelihood, potters take the clay and temper, and bring what the *mala* consider feminine, to life in the form of a pot. The pottery vessel can be used to bring sustenance to the potter family by selling or exchanging for food and processing food into an edible form.

Once pots have been decorated they need to dry. The lack of land that Gamo potters have access to because of their status within the caste hierarchy limits their production because they do not have adequate places to dry their pots. The Gamo live in an environment, especially from May to September, where the weather is humid, moist, cold, and cloudy, which increases the drying time. Thus, potters allocate a considerable amount of time for drying, which can range from 7 to 28 days depending on the size of the vessel.

## DECORATION

Women as potters decide where to place vessel decoration based most often on vessel type and community style. The central and northern Gamo potters, including the potters living in Guyla, decorate their vessels with a combination of burnishing, appliqué, incising, and rippling, whereas the Zuza potters decorate their pots only with appliqué.

Once the pots have dried, potters burnish their pots with a quartzite polishing stone (*elasucha*) that is often an heirloom passed down from the potter's mother or mother-in-law. The location of the burnishing relies on the vessel type and will include burnishing on both the interior and exterior walls or only on one side of the wall. Potters stated that burnishing gives the pots "a bright color." Husbands will usually help their wives in the burnishing of pots to help speed up the production process in order to make sure that there are enough pots to fire so they can sell at one of the upcoming weekly markets. After burnishing and decorating the pots, potters prefire vessels on top of a wooden rack (*afansha*) located in the workshop or potter's house or placed around a small hearth at the same location. Men and women share in the duties of firing the vessels. The vessels are slowly smoked and heated for approximately four hours, before being put in the open fire located outside in the compound (see below).

Women use four types of decoration: *sheto*, *temo*, *kansa*, and *beesho*. Appliqué



rings (*shetoti*) that encompass a vessel are common on the jars. Usually one *sheto* is placed on the maximum circumference of the jars, but the beer jars may have two or three *shetoti* placed on their maximum circumference. Three *shetoti* are placed also on the upper body of the beer jars. A *sheto* is also found on the base of serving bowls, which serve as footrings, but sometimes *shetoti* can begin at the maximum circumference of the serving bowl and continue either to the base or to the rim. A second type of decoration, *temoti*, is also an appliqué type, which are small (numbering three to nine) projections found on the upper exterior wall of the jars. Sometimes potters put a series of *temoti* on the upper body of the wide-mouth medium jars, which otherwise are undecorated. A third type of decoration is rippling (*kansa*), which is when the potter forms grooves on the exterior wall. Rippling is found on the necks of jars and serving vessels. The rim on all jars and the majority of bowls also is referred to as *kansa* (Fig. 8).

Women also use combstamping (*beesho*) to decorate vessels, which is most common in the districts of Zada and Doko, but is rarely used by Ochollo potters. The incised designs are made with either sheep teeth attached to a stick or two iron prongs attached to a wood handle (both tools are named *chechamarcho*). The *beesho* can be applied on the interior and/or exterior of the serving bowls and dishes, the exterior of the narrow-mouth small jars and on the exterior of the water pipes. The individual potter and the larger village/regional stylistic traditions dictate this type of decoration. In addition, potters often discussed how combstamping is a time consuming activity. Potters spend more time on combstamping than any other type of decorations because they combstamp large sections of the interior and/or exterior. Potters, who live in the Zada district, combstamp their serving bowls and drinking jars more when they sell at the weekly market than



Fig. 8. A Ezo potter decorating a jar neck with *kansa*.

when they sell to women consumers in their resident households. This a result of potters wanting to catch the “eye” of the women consumer. All merchants, including potters, selling items in the markets have designated areas to where they sit and sell their wares. Thus, potters are grouped together and are competing against each other and are spending more labor time to produce these combstamped vessels. Serving vessels produced in the central Gamo region may have a combination of all types of decorative styles, based on the individual potter, the village and the regional style.

## INNOVATION AND FUELWOOD SHORTAGES

Firing pots is an essential part of production, and in the face of increasing population and expansion of agricultural fields, women potters have had to make some critical decisions and innovative solutions to fuelwood shortages. Fuelwood shortages commonly were mentioned by potters living in the highlands as causing production problems because of deforestation and the protection of sacred forests, and also having no land to collect from. Both men and women potters will work together to collect fuelwood, however compared with any other aspect of pottery production, this is where men will contribute a majority of their labor (Fig. 9).

Guyla potters use cow dung (*osha shasha*) and/or horse dung (*fando shasha*), if they are not able to find enough wood or grass. Guyla village is located in the highland region and is more densely populated and farmed than in the lowland region, which causes problems for potter families in finding the proper fuels for firing. Some Guyla potters travel to the far lowlands to obtain their fuelwood



Fig. 9. A Guyla man helps his wife fire her pots while burnishing a bowl.

with families working together to purchase a tree for fuelwood and collectively bringing the tree up from the lowlands and share with each other based on what each family contributed in purchasing the fuelwood. Zuza potters are more fortunate than Guyla potters since they live adjacent to the lowlands where there is plenty of fuelwood. Zuza potters use 10 types of fuels. Gamo potters attempt to find their preferred fuel, because they are more concerned with finding fuels that burn for an extended period of time, rather than high temperatures.

Potters construct open fires by placing either a layer of ash or eucalyptus leaves on the ground. This is done to provide a buffer between the ground and the vessels, as the ground may be moist, which will cause the vessels to crack. A layer of wood is carefully laid on the ash or leaf surface. Then the potters place the pots on top of the wood and finally dried grass is applied. During the firing of the vessels, more grass is placed onto the fire and the potter eventually pokes a stick at the base of the grass heap to make a hole so the potter can see how the vessels are firing. This also provides more oxygen to the fire, which will ignite the remaining portion of the grass. The open fire lasts approximately two hours. Potters usually fire between 4 and 30 vessels on a specific day every week. Generally the vessels are fired the day before they are taken to the market.

Immediately after removal from the fire, women apply either one of a combination of *etema* (i.e., liquid from the ensete plant), cow dung, or smudge (with leaves) to the exterior and/or interior of the vessel to give the vessel strength and beauty.

## WOMEN AS CONSUMERS AND CERAMIC DISTRIBUTION

Women are responsible for deciding from who they will purchase their pots and what type of pot needs to be purchased for the household. Because potters represent a caste group in Gamo society, they can either sell their pots to *mala* clients who commission them in their community (*mayla*), or in the market place. In the past before the integration of an Ethiopian currency (birr), potters and farmers exchanged pots for food, but presently there is a mixture of exchange for food and purchasing with the birr. However, the system remains as an important means of social and economic integration between the two castes (i.e., *mala* and *mana*). Potters are responsible for supplying their community with pots, but also they are free to sell at weekly markets, providing non-potter communities access to vessels (Fig. 10).

Women consumers in the communities of Guyla and Zuza either purchase their pots from markets or directly from the potters' households. The inhabitants of Etello, a non-pottery-producing community, must travel to markets to purchase vessels. Where potters live can have a significant impact on the frequency of household vessels. Communities with resident potters (e.g., Guyla and Zuza) have more pots per household compared to communities where potters do not live (e.g., Etello). The 20 household assemblages analyzed in each community indicates that Guyla and Zuza have a mean of 24.5 and 17.3 pots per household and in contrast, Etello has only a mean of 11.1 pots per household.



**Fig. 10.** Ezo Birbir potters carry their pots to the Ezo market.

### Patron-Client Communities

The patron-client relationship between potters and non-potters is strong in Guyla with Guyla potters producing almost three-fourths (71%) of the pots inventoried in Guyla. Furthermore, the vessel inventory indicates that 70% of the Guyla households obtain 50% or more of their pots from a single potter. Although women in Guyla prefer Birbir pots, which have a reputation as being the best-made pots, only 15% of the pots used in Guyla were produced in the Birbir region. This indicates that even though a majority of women prefer Birbir pots, the strong patron-client system and proximity seems to be a stronger reason for consumers to purchase Guyla pots. This emphasizes that the patron-client relationship between the women consumers (*mala*) and women potters (*mana*) is longstanding in Gamo society, where the farmer households purchase a majority of pots from a specific potter.

There is also a strong patron-client relationship in Zuza Ochollo. Zuza women prefer either the Zuza pottery (56%) or a combination of Zuza and other pottery found in villages that are part of Ochollo district/*dere*. Ochollo has a market every Sunday with all Ochollo potters attending to sell their wares. The consumers prefer Ochollo potters for technological and nontechnological factors. Most women believe that the Ochollo pots are stronger (technological), meaning they last a long time or are more durable. Other important technological factors include the quality of the clay, the quality of the work, and/or the length of time the potters take in drying their pots. Some Zuza women state that acquiring pots in close proximity to their household, which is located on a very steep hill was important. Thus, both Guyla and Zuza demonstrate that there is a culture of a strong patron-client relationship between women as household consumers and women as resident potters.



## Market Communities

Market communities do not have resident potters. Etello serves as an example of a community with no potters living within the larger district of Doko. Thus, women usually travel to the closest market to purchase or barter for their household pots. The pottery inventory data indicate a difference between the preference and actual use of pottery among Etello consumers. The household inventory of pots in Etello indicates that the highest percentage of pots are manufactured in Zada (32%). This is a result of women traveling to the closest market, Doko Mesho, where Zada potters sell their wares. Although the majority of the Etello consumers prefer Birbir pots, less than one-fifth (18%) of the women from Etello use Birbir pots. Thus, for Etello women, who are the primary consumers of household pots, proximity is an important factor.

## CURRENT AND FUTURE CHANGES

Gamo women are responsible for the majority of work related to pottery production, and carry a heavy burden as the primary source of their family's income. Fortunately for Gamo potters, industrial vessels have not made a significant impact on household assemblages. The only vessel form completely replaced by industrial vessels is the *sini*, which was replaced by the Chinese porcelain teacup. The use of plastic water containers is just beginning to impact how people transport their daily water, especially in communities located near large towns. Plastic containers do not break as easily and pottery transport jars have a short use-life because people tend to drop their vessels when they slip and fall on the wet and slick footpaths, making plastic containers more popular. However, a used 50 liter plastic container costs approximately 60 birr (U.S. \$4.00), whereas the average cost of a large jar costs only 3.36 birr (U.S. \$0.30). Therefore, most Gamo people continue to use pottery for the majority of their household needs rather than industrially produced wares. However, I expect this will change with large jars for storing water being one of the first vessels that potters stop producing since the plastic jerry can is becoming more ubiquitous in the town markets.

One of the enduring issues facing potters is population growth and its affect on the expansion of potential agricultural land. In the past, potters could always resort to working together by traveling to the lowlands and purchasing a tree to bring back for firing. However, over the last 15 years the lowland area of the Gamo landscape is being slashed and burned at an alarming rate, where once occurred a dense forest it is now a patchwork of plowed fields. Furthermore, farmers are utilizing every hectare for agricultural production in the highland area, even in areas above 3,000 m. This will not only affect potters collecting fuelwood for firing but also mining for clay as more landowners become less inclined to allow potters to mine for clay, which would reduce the agricultural potential of the farmer's land. A potential solution for potters is for them to rely on animal dung for firing vessels, but there are no easy solutions for the reduction of clay sources.

Another change that affects potters today is the expanding role of Christian missions in the Gamo region and how they may influence pottery production. Women potters who join a Pentecostal church are not allowed to produce beer pots or the water pipes for smoking tobacco. Pentecostal churches accept Gamo potters as part of their congregation and the Ethiopian Orthodox continues to exclude Gamo artisans. Thus, Pentecostal churches will continue to have a significant influence among artisan families.

Although the Gamo region is one of the few places on our planet where industrial made goods have not yet significantly impacted the everyday household pottery assemblage, Gamo society is changing rapidly and I believe it is not a matter of when but of how soon that potter families will face a new world where they will have to drastically change their craft. Considering that potters own little farmland at all, this will have a daunting effect on their social and economic well-being. Ultimately, the Gamo people will decide whether they wish to continue producing and using pottery into the future.

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